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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000017

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: KARENNI REFUGEE CAMP FEELING SQUEEZED

REF: CHIANG MAI 02 (DEATH OF KARENNI REFUGEE)

CHIANG MAI 00000017 001.2 OF 003

CLASSIFIED BY: Michael Morrow, Consul General, Chiang Mai, DoS.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) At the Karenni refugee camp where a violent clash with security forces last December left one refugee dead, order has been restored but follow-up actions promised by local officials have proceeded unevenly. A post-clash formal dialogue involving camp residents, local Thai authorities, and NGOs has not yet gotten underway. It will have a challenging array of issues to address given the extent to which the nearly 20,000 camp residents are feeling squeezed by official restrictions on their movement, education and employment. On February 14 the Ambassador will announce USG plans to begin a large-scale resettlement program at the camp in the fall that could ease the Karenni's currently bleak outlook, but will not be a cure-all for the lingering mistrust between the Karenni and the Thai authorities. End Summary.

Uneven Follow-up on December Clash

¶2. (SBU) During mid-January trip to Mae Hong Son province, CG met with local officials, NGOs, and Karenni activists to discuss conditions at Ban Nai Soi refugee camp (aka Site 1), where close to 20,000 Karenni refugees from Burma reside. Tensions there persist between the Karenni and local Thai officials following the December 15 clash between camp residents and security forces that resulted in the death of one Karenni refugee (Reftel).

¶3. (C) The December clash was sparked mainly by camp residents' displeasure over increasing official restrictions on their ability to leave the camp, and maltreatment by Ministry of Interior (MOI) forces responsible for camp security. Although order was quickly restored and has held since the incident, follow-up actions promised by local authorities have proceeded unevenly:

-- the MOI security unit involved in the clash has been rotated out. It was temporarily replaced by Royal Thai Army and Border Police Patrol units, which were welcomed by camp residents. Since then, a new MOI unit has arrived to handle camp security. Camp leaders are wary that this group, like the one before it,

could ultimately sink into the same corrupt and allegedly abusive practices as the one before it (see Reftel), and have requested the permanent removal of MOI security forces from the camp.

-- In the incident's immediate aftermath, local Thai authorities agreed to form a committee comprised of the MOI Camp Commander, the camp's Karenni leadership, the Vice Governor and other local Thai authorities, and representatives from the local offices of the UNHCR and other NGOs. The group was to meet monthly to address issues of concern involving camp conditions and administration. However, the committee's first meeting has yet to take place, reportedly because all committee members need time to look over competing drafts of revised camp regulations. The plan is for camp residents and Thai authorities to each develop their own draft, and then meld these into a new set of regulations acceptable to both parties. The camp leadership has already prepared its draft, which calls for the camp's day-to-day operations to be administered not by Thai authorities but by the residents themselves, as had been the case prior to an early 2005 surge in fighting between the Burmese Army and Karenni troops. The draft also stipulates that, while Thai law will apply in the camp with respect to "serious cases," responsibility for everyday law and order should return to the Camp Committee working with Karenni security staff.

-- Police investigation of the December 15 incident is still ongoing. The investigation has two tracks: the killing of the Karenni refugee (as insisted by camp leadership), and the destruction of government vehicles and other property (as insisted by authorities). Camp leaders are disturbed that, in their view, Thai authorities have placed the two tracks on equal footing. They are also displeased that the MOI Camp Commander is still actively involved in camp administrative duties, and has been relieved only of his responsibilities for camp security.

Camp Residents Feel Squeezed on Access, Education, Employment, Health

CHIANG MAI 00000017 002.2 OF 003

14. (C) Beyond the immediacy of the December violence and its aftermath, our interlocutors identified a range of issues indicating that the conditions of camp life have gotten tougher in recent months. Moreover, they assert that these issues were the root cause of the December clash and ongoing, unresolved tensions between camp residents and local Thai authorities.

15. (C) Tightened restrictions on movement and access is one such concern. According to both Karenni activists and NGO workers, action by district authorities to tighten control of access to and from the camps pre-dates the December violence and also predates the unrest inside Burma of late last summer. Camp leaders report that, over the last several months, new restrictions included greater difficulty for camp residents to get passes to leave the camp; greater difficulty for NGO workers and other non-residents to get passes to enter the camp; and the ordering of community based organizations (CBOs) working just outside the camp to move back inside the camp, thus restricting their mobility.

16. (C) International Rescue Committee (IRC) managers echoed this concern, complaining that district authorities have restricted movement of their Karenni staff members, and moved their CBO partners - such as Karenni health, social and news organizations - back into the camp. This prevents CBO workers from coming into Mae Hong Son town to access email and internet, effectively cutting them off from the outside world. The IRC has tried to push back on these access and movement issues, but so far to no avail. Camp leaders are calling for a system of weekly passes allowing travel into town, but have little leverage with district officials. The local UNHCR office explained to us that, since Thailand is not a signatory of international refugee conventions, the movement of camp

residents is subject to restrictions under Thai immigration law.

¶7. (SBU) Education is another area of growing concern for camp residents and NGOs. Camp leaders assert that education standards inside the camp are falling due to access restrictions that prevent skilled, outside volunteer teachers from entering the camp and block refugees from attending courses outside the camp. A broader issue is the Thai Government's policy of not sanctioning post-secondary education in the refugee camps, nor allowing students to leave the camps to study externally.

¶8. (SBU) The restrictions on movement and education create employment hardships, our interlocutors said. Camp residents are now increasingly unable to get out for work as agricultural day laborers or to sell camp-made products. Karenni activists and NGO workers at the Thai-Burma Border Consortium both highlighted the economic hardship brought on by this loss of income-generating opportunities.

¶9. (C) Health care in the camps is also under growing stress, we were told. The IRC, the camp's primary health care provider, reported the camp is losing IRC-trained Karenni nurses and physicians to resettlement programs, mainly in Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavia. This necessitates training new medical staff, bringing in outside doctors, and/or referring more cases to outside hospitals, all of which strain IRC's budget.

Thai, Karenni Perspectives on Burma Clash

¶10. (C) Our separate meetings with the Governor, the local Chamber of Commerce, and the Karenni National Progressive Party illustrated how far apart the communities are on the broader issue of Burma and how it relates to the Karenni's plight. Mae Hong Son Governor Thongchai Wongrianthong, in an initial courtesy call prior to our other meetings, told us that his underlying condition for working with the Karenni camp residents was that the Karenni should refrain from activities that would arouse Rangoon's ire, including political activities inciting anti-GOB sentiment. Chamber of Commerce officials' comments about the Karenni were limited to expressions of concern about camp overpopulation and the alleged diversion of Thai medical care resources from Thais to Karenni. The KNPP, meanwhile, complained to us about the curtailment by Thai authorities last year of a peaceful candlelight vigil in support of monks protesting in Burma. They also said the MOI Camp Commandant cautioned the KNPP last fall to hold back on anti-GOB agitation due to nervousness in Bangkok.

Comment

¶11. (C) The committee talks that are now finally underway give

CHIANG MAI 00000017 003.2 OF 003

camp residents the opportunity to have direct contact with Thai officials whom they normally cannot access. For the talks to succeed in addressing the lingering mistrust between Karenni refugees and local authorities, there will have to be a genuine two-way dialogue, which remains to be seen. Meanwhile, in mid-February the Ambassador will announce that this fall the USG will begin a large-scale resettlement program from Ban Nai Soi and the other three refugee camps in Mae Hong Son. This could ease the Karenni's currently bleak outlook, but will not be a cure-all for the difficult issues between the Karenni and the Thai authorities on movement, education, and employment.
MORROW